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Thailand

Biotechnology

Transgenics: Tough for Thais to Tackle

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Report Highlights:

The following is an unofficial translation of a newspaper story that appeared in the Thai-language press on Mon., Feb 24, 2003.

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Unscheduled Report
Bangkok [TH1], TH

**U.S. pushed APEC to import GMOs
at the meeting in Chiang Rai, while Thailand's Ministry of Agriculture sought Cabinet
approval for field tests**

(Matichon Newspaper, Mon, Feb 24, 2003, pp. 1, 15; distribution 550,000 issues a day)

The Ministry of Agriculture was eager for GMO field testing in order not to lag behind the world and sought cabinet approval. The chairman of the Committee on Agriculture and Co-operatives pointed that we would get more advantages than disadvantages. The U.S., on the other hand, sent specialists to convince the participants in the APEC-SOM meeting.

According to APEC-SOM during Feb 12-21, 2003 in Chiang Rai, one of the topics discussed was Bio-technology, which was given priority by the U.S. representatives in particular the Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). The U.S. representatives invited related economies, including overseas producers and consumers and industrial sectors like Charoen Pokphand (CP) for speakers at the meeting. (sic) The reasons behind the U.S.'s priority over GMOs was the concerns over its agricultural sector which mostly were GMO plants, for example soybeans and corn. Meanwhile, the EU were strongly opposed to GMOs regarding the safety impact for humans. As a result, the U.S. had to convince countries in other regions, in particular Asian countries, or U.S. farmers would lose their markets.

The invited speakers illustrated the GMO's advantages being that GMO plants were free from fertilizers and pesticides of which the residuals were harmful to humans. In addition, the GMOs would help reduce production costs. However, it has been unable to prove if they were safe, or had no side-effects for human consumption. Also, nobody knew how long it would take to prove them safe. Take some chemical substance like DDT as an example, it took over 50 years to prove it harmful to humans.

As for CP, despite its support on GMO plants, its representatives were worried about the position of Thailand as a food exporter. As a result, to accept GMO plants or not depended on the market. However, the country who strongly supported GMO plants was the Philippines, as it was also a major food producer who wanted to export its products as much as possible. Therefore GMOs were their solution for increasing their production capacity without any increased costs in fertilizers and pesticides.

Mr. Pinit Korsriporn, Director of Foreign Agricultural Relations Division, said the current EU's strict measures on GMO importation affected APEC export countries, including Thailand, India, Malaysia, Chile, Australia and Canada. These countries were preparing information for discussions at the WTO meeting in Geneva, Switzerland. Thai chicken exports were now accused for GMO contamination from feed ingredients for which Thailand relied on GMO soybean imports. (sic)

Mr. Pitipong Pungbun Na Ayudhya, Agriculture Permanent Secretary, pointed out that Thailand would lose the opportunity to learn GMO technology, given the current official ban on GMO (left available only for laboratory test) since the April 3, 2001 cabinet decision. In addition, Mr. Ananta Dalodom, Chairman of the Committee on Agricultural and Co-operatives, Royal Thai Senate, was seeking cabinet approval for GMO field tests because many countries such as China, India, Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, were now active in GMO field tests.

In other recent news (the Nation newspaper, Wed, Feb 26, 2003, p3A), it was reported that the proposal for GMO field tests were strongly opposed by environmentalists and consumer groups. In addition, Bio Thai's Witoon Lianchamroon was calling for the passage of bio-safety bill to regulate GMO research because the current law was too weak to guard against possible risks from GMO research. Also, he urged authorities to disclose the contractual elements of GMO papaya research which had been done by Multinational Biotech Corp, along with two state authorities, including Agricultural Department and National Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology. Thai environmentalist and consumer groups are worried that the government's policy regarding GMOs is being influenced by a top GMO promoter, Deputy Agriculture Minister Newin Chidchob, who once allowed field tests on GMO cotton and caused what opponents called "vast" damage.